



# SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS AND FAMILIES IMPACTED BY SUBSTANCE USE

**At PolicyLab, we recognize that individuals impacted by substance use who are also caregivers of children need unique supports that are responsive to family context and experience.**

Families with a caregiver impacted by substance use navigate multiple [systems](#) simultaneously with their treatment and recovery, including health care, legal, child welfare, housing and others. Structural challenges within systems, alongside bias, stigma, and individual and systems-level knowledge gaps, present barriers to caregiver recovery and the well-being of the whole family. This is especially true for families experiencing [intersecting](#) social and economic challenges.

These barriers to accessing and sustaining recovery have consequential impacts on health [outcomes](#) for caregivers and their children. Mental health and substance use are leading contributors to the [maternal mortality](#) and [morbidity crisis](#) in the United States. Additionally, there are intergenerational impacts of not adequately supporting caregivers with substance use. Young children of parents with substance use disorder (SUD) may [experience](#) reduced caregiver attachment and engagement, unaddressed mental health and developmental issues, safety concerns, and are at a greater risk for developing substance use disorders of their own.

Our research emphasizes creating, sustaining, and evaluating programs that advance the evidence-base for whole family approaches to recovery, while advocating for policies and practices that disrupt pervasive and longstanding inequities.

*Here, we share examples of projects and publications related to this ongoing work.*

PolicyLab researchers are looking into programs and policies aimed at supporting families with a caregiver experiencing substance use.

In current work, we are focused on three key areas:



[Evaluating](#) community-based programs that support the well-being of families impacted by substance use.



[Examining](#) trends in prenatal and postpartum opioid use, treatment access and retention, and program availability.



[Advancing](#) policies and practices that enhance equitable access to care, reduce structural barriers and address intersecting challenges to family well-being.

## PolicyLab's Family Centered Approach

We take a **family-centered, strengths-based** and **systems-focused** approach to our work. We center caregiver experiences and acknowledge the layered policy environment and compounded structural inequities faced by families.

**Trauma-informed:** In recognition of the [widespread impact of trauma](#) in substance use-affected individuals and communities, we incorporate trauma-informed principles and careful consideration of what we study, whose perspectives are included, how we work with people impacted by substance use, and where and how our study results are shared.

**Partnerships:** We aim to do our work in partnership with individuals and organizations most affected by research on SUD, recovery and parenting. This includes clinical and community-based providers working directly with populations experiencing SUD, social service practitioners focused on intersecting issues (e.g., intimate partner violence, mental health) and those with lived experience.

**Mixed methods:** We integrate quantitative (e.g., health system data, survey data) and qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups) [research methods](#) to better understand how and why programs and policies work in different contexts, elevate personal experiences and expedite translation of research to practice.

## EVALUATING COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS

We evaluate programs support the well-being of families impacted by substance use, including adaptations to evidence-based home visiting, strengths-based group sessions for parents in recovery and therapeutic models for parents in residential treatment programs.

### PROJECTS

#### Evaluating Implementation of the Families in Recovery Program

PolicyLab partnered with the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation of Families in Recovery, a seven session group parenting program for caregivers affected by SUD and living in recovery. This evaluation aimed to understand the perceived impacts of the program among interest holders, identify factors that contribute to successful implementation and assess model fidelity across 27 implementation sites in three states. Learn more [here](#).

#### Young Child and Parent Project: Improving the Well-being and Safety of Families with Parental Substance Abuse

PolicyLab partnered with the Health Federation of Philadelphia in a Children's Bureau Regional Partnership Grant to evaluate a dyadic parent-child psychotherapy model for mothers in substance use treatment and recovery that seeks to strengthen parenting skills and attachment, improve infant and young child development, and reduce child welfare involvement for families. Learn more [here](#).

#### Learning from Innovation: Supporting Families Impacted by Opioid Use Disorder through Evidence-based Home Visiting

PolicyLab partnered with the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning to design an implementation evaluation for evidence-based home visiting program models engaged in a pilot program to implement adaptations to address the needs of families with young children impacted by substance use in Pennsylvania. Learn more [here](#).

### PUBLICATIONS

*Innovations in Evidence-Based Home Visiting Intended to Engage and Support Families Impacted by Opioid Use Disorder: Three Case Studies from Pennsylvania Pilot Programs*  
[\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)

*Families in Recovery Implementation Evaluation Final Report* [\[REPORT\]](#)



## SPOTLIGHT ON TERMINOLOGY

The words we use to describe families' experiences with substance use can combat stigma and shame and improve recovery outcomes. Throughout our work, we aim to use language that is [accurate, respectful and based in the best available evidence](#). This includes using person-first language when discussing caregivers, infants, and [children of caregivers with substance use disorder](#), neutral terms about substance use/misuse, and expansive language in referring to families and caregivers.

**Parents and Caregivers:** There are many [types](#) of family structures, including blended families, single parent households, foster families, same-sex and non-binary families, multi-generational families, and families where children are raised by a grandparent or other relative. Our use of "caregiver" and "parent" extends to adults within all family structures who have caretaking responsibilities.

**Substance Use:** Substance use—including opioid use—is best viewed on a [spectrum](#). People use substances for different reasons, at various points over time, with fluctuating levels of harm. Much of our work focuses on caregivers with SUD, a [health condition](#) resulting in altered brain chemistry and interference with everyday life. Our use of the broad term "substance use" is reflective of the importance of supporting pregnant and parenting people at all stages of substance use and recovery.

**Recovery:** A highly personal, self-directed, strengths-based [process](#) towards health and well-being. Recovery is characterized not by a person's decision to abstain or episodically return to use, but by growth, resilience, and the belief that positive outcomes are possible.

**Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD):** MOUD, such as methadone and buprenorphine, are evidence-based [medications](#) to treat [opioid use disorder in pregnancy](#). The term [MOUD](#) aligns with how other medications are described to treat mental health conditions (e.g., antidepressants).



## EXAMINING TRENDS

We examine trends in prenatal and postpartum opioid use, treatment access and retention, and program availability.

### PROJECTS

#### Improving Access to Evidence-Based Treatment for Pregnant and Postpartum People with OUD

PolicyLab conducted a mixed-methods study to improve equitable access to evidence-based treatment for pregnant and postpartum caregivers with opioid use disorder. The research described access to Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) for privately insured pregnant and postpartum people and characterized the structural and social barriers to accessing MOUD. Learn more [here](#).

#### Pennsylvania Family Support Needs Assessment

PolicyLab partnered with the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning to conduct a county-level needs assessment of health resources and economic and social conditions for Pennsylvania families with young children. The assessment includes a specific focus on how to better support pregnant and parenting people in treatment and recovery for opioid use. Learn more [here](#).

### PUBLICATIONS

*Receipt and duration of buprenorphine treatment during pregnancy and postpartum periods in a national privately-insured cohort* [\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)

*Addressing Opioid Use in Pregnant and Postpartum People* [\[DATA REVIEW\]](#)

*Addressing Opioid Use Treatment Barriers for Pregnant People* [\[VIDEO\]](#)

*Navigating opioid use disorder treatment for pregnant and parenting people: composite narratives for policy action* [\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)

*Postpartum Persistent Opioid Use After Opioid Exposure for Childbirth* [\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)



## ADVANCING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

We advance policies and practices that enhance equitable access to care, reduce structural barriers, and address intersecting challenges to family well-being, like intimate partner violence (IPV), child safety and unaddressed mental health challenges.

### PROJECTS

#### Strategies to Improve Connections to Services for Families Affected by Perinatal Substance Use

PolicyLab examined birth parents' perceptions and [experiences](#) regarding Plans of Safe Care, a voluntary care plan providing supportive services for families of infants born affected by prenatal substance use. Learn more [here](#).

#### Evaluating Telehealth as a Strategy for Reducing Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Disparities

PolicyLab is co-leading a project to determine the impact of the use of telehealth services in the delivery of maternity care on severe maternal morbidity events, including those related to substance use and mental health. The project will engage a multidisciplinary interest holder group to review data and ultimately develop best practice guidelines for using telehealth in pregnancy and postpartum care, focusing on equitable access and improved care delivery. Learn more [here](#).

#### Improving Outcomes for Families Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence Through Home Visiting

Pregnant and new caregivers with substance use often simultaneously experience intimate partner violence and/or other challenges, including housing instability. PolicyLab is partnering with local early childhood home visiting programs, IPV agencies serving both survivors and people who have harmed their partner, lived experience experts, and Philadelphia's Office of Domestic Violence Strategies to work toward a trauma-informed, systems-level response for expectant and parenting families experiencing IPV. Learn more [here](#).

### PUBLICATIONS

*The Role of Child Care in Family Centered Approaches to Treatment for Substance Use Disorder* [\[ISSUE BRIEF\]](#)

*"Instead of just taking my baby, they could've actually given me a chance": Experiences with plans of safe care among birth parents impacted by perinatal substance use* [\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)

*A Social Network Analysis of a Multi-sector Service System for Intimate Partner Violence in a Large U.S. City* [\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)

*Identifying Barriers and Interagency Solutions to Meeting the Needs of Families Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence: Home Visiting and IPV Agency Perspectives* [\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)

*Consideration of Children in Naloxone Coprescribing Laws* [\[JOURNAL ARTICLE\]](#)

*Intimate Partner Violence Rises Around Pregnancy. How Can We Elevate the Essential Needs of Pregnant and Parenting Survivors?* [\[BLOG\]](#)

*Strategies to Improve Connections to Services for Families Affected by Perinatal Substance Use* [\[BLOG\]](#)

*Preventing Pediatric Injury from Medical Opioids* [\[BLOG\]](#)



**FOR QUESTIONS OR FURTHER DISCUSSION, CONTACT:**

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The mission of PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) is to achieve optimal child health and well-being by informing program and policy changes through interdisciplinary research. PolicyLab is a Center of Emphasis within the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute, one of the largest pediatric research institutes in the country.

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